THE HERITAGE Of the CIVIL WAR

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> "The best representatives of the American proletariat are those expressing the revolutionary tradition in the life of the American people. This tradition originated in the war of liberation against the English in the 18th century and in the Civil War in the 19th century . . . Where can you find an American so pedantic, so absolutely idiotic as to deny the revolutionary and progressive significance of the American Civil War of 1860-65?"—*Lenin.*

THE ATTITUDE of the various classes of a society to the critical periods of its history is often a decisive index of the stage these classes have reached in their social life-cycle, of their relations among themselves and to society as a whole. It is altogether symptomatic of the thoro inner decay of the bourgeoisie today that it openly rejects and belies all that is great, vital and progressive in American history or else distorts it beyond recognition. It is no less characteristic of the historical immaturity of the American proletariat and of the lack of firm roots of its advanced sections in the best traditions of our people that this class, which should be the "true guardian" of all that is revolutionary

in the past, is completely without any appreciation of its mission in this respect and has never yet challenged the historical judgments of the class enemy. But it is the radical intellectuals, by "nature," so to speak, in living contact with vital historical tradition, who have failed most miserably and have thereby exposed their own shallowness and lack of penetrating social comprehension. For, with a few notable exceptions, the radical intellectuals have no new word to say: they either deny any significant bond with the past or else echo helplessly and confusedly the reactionary falsifications of the bourgeoisie.

Take that heroic period of American history usually recognized under the conventional rubrics of "The Abolition Movement," "The Civil War," and "Reconstruction," but which really forms one organic epoch. The great traditions of this period—and especially of Reconstruction—are shamelessly repudiated by the official heirs of Stevens and Sumner. In the last quarter of a century hardly a single book has appeared consistently championing or sympathetically interpreting the great ideals of the crusade against slavery, whereas scores and hundreds have dropped from the presses in ignoble "extenuation" of the North, in open apology of the Confederacy, in measureless abuse of the Radical figures of Reconstruction. The Reconstruction Period, as the logical culmination of decades of previous

development, has borne the brunt of the reaction. The "classical" American historians (typified by Rhodes) have pictured it as an unpleasant episode intelligible only in terms of "war-time passions" and "party politics." The avowedly pro-Southern historians, beginning with Dunning, treat the period of Reconstruction as the original sin, the source of all evil in post-Civil War American life. The "liberal" historians (Beard) exhibit an incredible shallowness and vulgarity of historical judgment which are reflected in the works of the so-called "Marxist" historians (Simons, Oneal, Bimba).

How great the confusion is can be indicated by an example. In an essay on Lowell in the recent collection, *American Writers on American Literature,* Robert Morss Lovett speaks with disgust of the "envenomed fanaticism of Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens" and declares with conviction that "Johnson and Seward were *wisely* carrying out Lincoln's policy of Reconstruction." Professor Lovett is an extreme liberal, perhaps even a radical—yet his historical judgments coincide perfectly with those of the avowed apologists of the old slaveocracy, of the pseudo-aristocracy built on the toil and blood of millions of black slaves!

A revaluation of this, as of all other periods of American history is a real intellectual need of the day. And such a revaluation is possible only from the vantage of the

revolutionary proletarian viewpoint, by means of the historical dialectics of Marxism.

The American Civil War came as the climax of decades of profound economic conflicts and social struggles. "The present struggle between the South and the North," wrote Marx[1] in 1861, "is . . . nothing but a struggle between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labor. Because the two systems can no longer live peaceably side by side on the North American continent, the struggle has broken out." This "irrepressible conflict," which manifested itself in a clash between the agrarian slaveowners and industrial bourgeoisie, came to expression in the battle over the limitation of slave territory—over the West, in other words. "The contest for the territories which opened the dire epopee, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or prostituted to the tramp of the slaveowners?"[2] But "the continual expansion of territory and the continual spread of slavery over and beyond its old boundaries (were) the life principles of the slave states of the Union"[3] and so the

1 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in the United States,* in the Vienna *Presse,* November 7, 1861.

2 Address of the International Workingmen's Association to President Lincoln, published December 23, 1864, written by Marx.

3 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in North America,* in the Vienna *Presse,* October 25, 1861.

struggle over the West was in the profoundest sense a struggle over the very existence of the slave system as such.

The contest over slavery penetrated into all spheres of national life. It was a struggle over labor and democracy as well. When Marx[4] declared that, were it allowed to maintain its existence, the "slave system would infect the whole union . . . In the Northern states, where slavery is practically unfeasable, the white working class would gradually be pressed down to the level of helotism," he was merely drawing the obvious lesson from the repeated declarations of the slaveowning oligarchs who, thru Governor McDuffie of South Carolina, pronounced the "laboring population, bleached or unbleached, a dangerous element in the body politic"[5] and, thru Edward Everett, their Northern apologist, announced that "the great relation of servitude in some form or other . . . is inseparable from our nature".[6] The thoroly anti-democratic sentiments of the slaveowners were later fully exposed in the Confederate constitution, the work of their own hands. "A closer examination of the history of the secession movement," wrote Marx, "shows that the

4 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in the United States,* in the Vienna *Presse,* November 7, 1861.

5 *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America,* by Henry Wilson, p. 325.

6 *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America,* by Henry Wilson, p. 329.

secession constitution is all usurpation . . . Nowhere did they allow the people to vote en masse . . . It was not only a question of secession from the North but also of the consolidation and sharpening of the power of the oligarchy of the 300,000 slaveowners against the five million whites of the South."[7]

The great struggle went thru many stages before it finally climaxed in war. Until its very last phase, the *objective* significance of the movement—the eradication of slavery—remained quite outside the historical field of vision of the Northern bourgeoisie as a whole, altho it was far more obvious to the Southern slaveowners. The class *as a class* trod the path of revolution with the hesitating steps of petty compromise and political bargaining. Even during the war Marx[8] branded Lincoln's actions as having "the appearance of illiberal stipulated conditions which an attorney presents to an opponent." But, he added, "this does not interfere with their historic content."

The advance guard of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, developed far more rapidly than the class as a whole. It reached a mature stage of historical consciousness relatively early in the struggle. In the Abolitionists, almost exclusively ideologists, this

7 *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Engels und Marx,* vol. 3, p. 26. Letter of Marx of July 1, 1861.

8 *Briefwechsel,* etc., vol. 3, p. 96. Letter of Marx of October 29, 1862.

intellectual vanguard found its concrete embodiment.

As a result of inevitable historical conditions, the Abolitionist vanguard arose and developed apart from its class and, at times, even in antagonism to it, the antagonism of the narrow interests of the moment as counterposed to the far-visioned interests of the great historical objective.

The American Abolitionists were typical bourgeois-democratic revolutionists under specific American conditions. They felt their movement linked up with the great humanitarian causes of the day (the "labor question," the "peace question," the emancipation of women, temperance, philanthropy) and with the bourgeois revolutionary movement in Europe. "He hailed the revolution (of 1848) in France," Moorfield Storey [9] tells of Sumner, "and similar outbreaks in other countries as parts of the great movement for freedom, of which the anti-slavery agitation in America was another part."

Their inevitable isolation from their class and, above all, from the masses of the people, their ideological introversion and self-sufficiency, gave the Abolitionists a distinctly mystical-utopian, anarchistic and pacifistic cast in

9 *Charles Sumner,* by Moorefield Storey, p. 61. It is also interesting to note the later connections between the Radicals and the Irish national revolutionaries, the Fenians.

outlook. In a very real sense the Abolitionists were the legitimate bearers of the "generous purpose of transcendentalism;" they were also closely associated with the utopian socialist movements of the 1840's. Side by side with the radical utopians, there made themselves felt in the ranks of the Abolitionists a terrorist, insurrectionary wing (John Brown) as well as a parliamentary political tendency (Sumner).[10]

It is now a century since the first heroic efforts were made to organize the Abolition movement in this country in the face of a hostile, or at best indifferent, public sentiment. It was in the 1830's that the various local Anti-Slavery Societies, especially the New York and New England organizations, were formed and later united in the American Anti-Slavery Society. A critical-historical study of the whole movement American Marxism certainly owes to the revolutionary traditions of our people.

The inevitable march of events soon brought on the Civil War. "From resistance to the slave power," the North moved on to "death to slavery." [11] But the Civil War cannot be studied in isolation. The Civil War and the

10 See my article, "Communists and Abolitionists," *Workers Age,* April 9, 1932.

11 Address of the International Workingmen's Association to President Lincoln, published December 23, 1864, written by Marx.

Reconstruction Period form an organic unity; they both constitute essentially a bourgeois revolution in two stages: first, the defeat of the armed counter-revolution of the slaveowners (the Civil War) and, secondly, the attempt to draw all the historically necessary consequences, economic, political, and social, of this defeat of the counter-revolution (the Reconstruction Period). In spite of the highly specific form which this bourgeois revolution assumed in this country,[12] its essential and fundamental aims were still those of the classical bourgeois-democratic revolution: the national consolidation of the country (the defeat of secession and of "States Rights"), the thoro eradication of all pre-capitalist economic forms (abolition of slavery), the destruction of the political power of the aristocracy (disfranchisement of the former slaveowners and rebels), the advance of democracy (the enfranchisement of the Negroes and of the poor whites in the South), the agrarian revolution (the Radical plan of confiscating the lands of the former slaveowners for distribution among the emancipated slaves), etc. Nor can the strict analogy be overlooked between the military dictatorship established by the Jacobins in the reactionary rural departments of France and the military rule of the South

12 A quite similar type of bourgeois revolution took place in Switzerland in The War of Secession of 1847 (Sonderbund War).

during Reconstruction. The general historical form is the same, however different may be the external aspects of the specific episodes.

How profoundly similar in historical content and even in significant phraseology was the Civil War to the classical bourgeois-democratic revolution can be seen from this thoroly characteristic utterance of the great Radical leader, Thad Stevens:[13]

> "It is intended to revolutionize their (the South's) principles and feelings . . . to work a radical reorganization in Southern institutions, habits, and manners . . . The whole fabric of Southern society must be changed, and it never can be done if this opportunity is lost . . . How can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse, exist in a mingled community of nabobs and serfs; of the owners of twenty thousand acre manors with lordly palaces and the occupants of narrow huts inhabited by 'low white trash'? If the South is ever to be made a safe republic let her lands be cultivated by the toil of the owners or the free labor of intelligent citizens. This must be done even tho it drives her nobility into exile! If they go, all the better. It will be hard to persuade the owner of ten thousand acres of land, who drives a coach and four, that he is not degraded by sitting at the same table or in the same pew, with the embrowned and hard-handed farmer who has himself cultivated his own thriving homestead of 150 acres. The country would be well rid of

13 Speech at Lancaster, Pa., September 7, 1865.

the proud, bloated and defiant rebels . . . The foundations of their institutions . . . must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain."

Our "liberal" historians, whose vulgar philistinism is equalled only by the narrow-mindedness of those "Marxian" historians who echo them, stand puzzled, even aghast, before the great events of this heroic period and are able only to mumble some platitudinous phrases about "corruption" and "greed"! Of course, there was corruption and greed—and on an almost incredible scale too! But after all it was a *bourgeois* revolution operating on the sacrosanct level of private property and private appropriation. Whatever the fatal finger of private property touches, it corrupts! Nevertheless, mankind is profoundly interested that, in the struggle between the lower and higher forms of private property (forms of exploitation), the latter should emerge victorious, for their victory signifies the final relegation to the scrap-heap of history of much that is outlived and reactionary in the institutions of society and a great step forward along the road towards the eventual emancipation of the human race from every form of exploitation and oppression. "I naturally see what is repulsive in the form of the Yankee movement," wrote Marx,[14] "but

14 *Briefwechsel*, etc., vol. 3, p. 96. Letter of October 29, 1862. It should be recalled also that

I find the reason for it in the nature of a bourgeois democracy . . . where swindle has been on the sovereign throne for so long. Nevertheless the events are world-upheaving . . . "

"Two paths and two outcomes are possible in every bourgeois revolution":[15] the radical (Jacobin) and the conservative (Girondin) roads. The struggle between these two courses forms the essential content of the whole Reconstruction Period. At first the Radical course had the upper hand and it looked as if the bourgeois-democratic revolution would be carried thru to its ultimate conclusion. Then came a period of vacillation. Finally the Conservative course (outlined by Lincoln and championed by Johnson) emerged triumphant. The Negro slave was indeed legally emancipated but he was not transformed into a free (in the bourgeois sense) proletarian or independent peasant-proprietor. No; the slave status gave way before a new semi-servile status, a *caste status* in which the American Negro has labored ever since.

To what must the triumph of the Conser-

the great orgy of corruption in the post-Civil War days came with the triumph of the Conservatives and as a preparatory phase of it. Engels (Anti-Duhring) speaks of the "swindle and speculation flourishing in the *decline* of the revolution."

15 *Two Tactics of the Social-democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, by V. I. Lenin

vatives and the frustration and distortion of the democratic revolution be attributed? Not merely to the resistance of the still powerful ruling class of the South but also to the inner weakness of the Northern capitalist class itself, within which there emerged powerful reactionary elements. Several factors, closely intertwined, played a decisive part in bringing about this turn of events: the role of the West, the effect of the tremendous expansion of Northern capitalism and the retreat of the more conservative sections of the bourgeoisie before the ultimate implications of the democratic revolution carried thru to completion.

The unhampered and unrestrained exploitation of the West became the absorbing object of the decisive sections of the Northern bourgeoisie, especially the financiers and merchants—had not the struggle over the West played the leading role in precipitating the war? On the basis of the decisive victory of the industrial bourgeoisie thru the Civil War, an unprecedented expansion of industry, commerce and finance along strictly capitalist lines began, in the course of which the Federal government was converted into a most energetic and avowed champion of the economic interests of the industrial bourgeoisie (tariff, resumption of specie payment, grants to railroads and other corporations, etc.). The tremendous upsurge of capitalism did not proceed along the lines of the industrialization

("bourgeoisification") of the South (industrialization here had to wait until the 1890's for a real start); it was almost entirely absorbed in the economic expansion of the North and in the West. And for the free exploitation of the West, for unhampered expansion in the North, "peace" in the rear was necessary. The "disturbed condition" of the South, the natural consequence of any serious attempt at a revolutionary transformation of the Southern order, must be ended, of course thru a compromise with the ex-slaveowners at the expense of the Negro freedmen, the masses of the poor white Southern population and the interests of the country as a whole.

Furthermore the radicalism of the Radicals was beginning to go much too far to suit the money lords and merchant princes. Just as the conservative sections of the French bourgeoisie recoiled at the "excesses" of the Jacobin radicals, so did these gentlemen draw back in consternation at the agrarianism, equalitarianism and "violence" of the Radicals. Marx [16] has called attention to the fact that

> "Mr. Wade (a leading Radical, president of the Senate.—W.H.) declared in public meetings that after the abolition of slavery, a radical change in the relations of capital and of property in land is next upon the order of the day."

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16 *Capital*, by Karl Marx. Preface to the first edition.

Henry Cooke of the notorious banking firm of Jay Cooke, wrote:[17]

> "You know how I have felt for a long time, in regard to the course of the ultra-infidelic radicals like Wade, Sumner, Stevens et id omne genus. They were dragging the Republican party into all sorts of isms and extremes. Their policy was one of bitterness, hate and wild agrarianism. These reckless demagogues have had their day and the time has come for wiser counsel. With Wade uttering agrarian doctrines in Kansas and fanning the flames of vulgar prejudices, trying to array labor against capital and pandering to the basest passions; with Butler urging wholesale conscription thruout the South and wholesale repudiation thruout the North . . . ; with Stevens . . . advocating the idea of a flood of irredeemable paper money . . . ; with Pomeroy and Wade and Sprague and a host of others clamoring for the unsexing of woman and putting a ballot in her hand . . . what wonder is it that the accumulated load was too heavy for any party to carry . . . ?"

Thus came Thermidor in the second American revolution!

Two historical motives are indissolubly fused in every bourgeois revolution: on the one hand, the bourgeoisie ruthlessly clears the way of all pre-capitalist forms, of all "remnants of feudalism"; on the other, with the newly won state power as a lever, it stimulates

17 E. P. Oberholtzer, *Life of Jay Cooke*, II, 23.

powerfully the accumulation of capital (which takes on the aspect of a primitive accumulation) as well as the expansion of the capitalist mode of production as a whole. The contradictory character of capitalism is reflected in the deeply contradictory mode of development of these two motives which are nevertheless inseparable. The former involves the *progressive* movement of the bourgeoisie, supported by the petty bourgeois strata and the proletariat, against the feudal elements (landowning aristocrats, slaveowners, etc.); the latter, the *reactionary* movement of the bourgeoisie, now frequently supported by the pillars of the old regime, against the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In the American Civil War, because of the specific form and circumstance under which the bourgeois revolution took place (its relative "lateness" historically), the second motive was dominant almost from the very beginning. For the Northern bourgeoisie Reconstruction became more and more a question of maintaing its hold (thru the Republican party) over the government, especially the Federal government, and less and less a question of transforming the South economically and socially. Since the genuine Radical course greatly emphasized the latter, indeed made it the very center of its program, the Northern bourgeoisie quickly liquidated Radicalism as such, altho retaining the old name and many of

the phrases for campaign use. That is the reason why so many of the old Abolitionists and Radicals, typified by Sumner, ultimately broke with the Republican party altogether. Under Grant it was already no longer the party of Stevens and Wade and Sumner. It is well known how sharply Sumner criticized Grant and his administration for their indifferent attitude towards the fundamental problems in the real emancipation of the black man.

In a very real sense, the Radical course was defeated when the Northern bourgeoisie finally rejected the plan of confiscating the large estates of the ex-slaveowners for distribution among the freedmen and the poor Unionist whites of the South, for without land emancipation was robbed of its economic foundation.[18] "We do not confiscate loyal men, nor

18 It is interesting to see how clearly the then radical Georges Clemenceau, in America as correspondent of the Paris *Temps,* understood this. On September 26, 1865, he wrote (American Reconstruction, 1865-1870): "The real misfortune of the Negro race is in owning no land of its own. There cannot be real (read: bourgeois.—W.H.) emancipation for men who do not possess at least a small portion of the soil . . . In spite of the war, and the confiscation bills, which remain dead letters, every inch of the land in the Southern states belongs to the former rebels . . . It would be too much to expect those masters of their own accord to conciliate the Negroes by conceding them a little land . . . "

rebels unless they are rich," Stevens wrote to a Southerner[19] and previously he had declared: "Forty acres of land and a hut would be more valuable to the freedman than the immediate right to vote."[20] Sumner too appreciated the supreme significance of land for the freedman. "Sumner felt that without education or land the freedmen would be at the mercy of their former masters," his biographer tells us.[21] But the Northern bourgeoisie as a class never seriously intended to carry thru such a revolutionary course as the confiscation of the land; it was already far too conservative for such heroic measures, the threat of agrarianism in the West and of the rising labor movement in the North was already too great. The bourgeoisie turned sharply to the right and Radical Reconstruction was lost!

Very few at the time really appreciated how lost the Radical cause was, for the old phrases were still current. But Thad Stevens was among the few. Already in 1866 Stevens saw what was ahead. In the House he made one of the most powerful and most pathetic speeches of his career:

> "In my youth," so runs the report of his speech in the *Congressional Globe* of June 4, 1866, "in manhood, and in old age, I had fondly dreamed that when any

19 New York *World*, June 10, 1867.

20 Speech in House of Representatives, May 1866.

21 *Life of Charles Sumner*, by Moorefield Storey, p. 332.

fortunate chance broke up for a while the foundations of our institutions," they would be remodeled "as to have freed them of every vestige of human oppression, of inequality of rights, of recognized degradation of the poor and the superior caste of the rich . . . This bright dream has vanished like the baseless fabric of a vision. I find that we shall be obliged to be content with patching up the worst portions of the ancient edifice and leaving it in many of its parts to be swept thru by the tempests, the frosts, and the storms of despotism."

But content he was not . . .

Far away in London, Karl Marx saw and fully understood the signs of the times. On June 24, 1865, only a few months after the new President has assumed office, Marx wrote [22] to Engels:

"Johnson's policy disturbs me. Ridiculous affectation of severity against individual persons; up to now highly *vacillating* and weak in the thing itself. The reaction has already begun in America and will soon be strengthened if this spinelessness is not put an end to."

And thirteen years later, on July 25, 1877 [23] he signalized the consummation of the historical betrayal of the Northern bourgeoisie and the Republican party in these words:

"The policy of the new president (Hayes) will make the Negroes, and the

22 *Briefwechsel,* etc., vol. 3.
23 *Briefwechsel,* etc., vol. 4.

great expropriations of land in favor of the railways, mining companies, etc . . . will make the already dissatisfied farmers into allies of the working class."

For the last fifty years it has been the fashion among historians to represent the Reconstruction governments of the Southern states in the grossest caricature, as grotesque monstrosities, as veritable nightmares of corruption, oppression and intrigue. Such shameful falsification must be destroyed. These governments, based upon the upsurging political activity of the newly emancipated slaves led by Northern men ("carpetbaggers") and some Southern white Radicals ("scalawags"), certainly did not compare in courtly grace and aristocratic pretension with the pre-war governments of the slaveowners. A people suddenly awakened to freedom is likely to be somewhat careless of political conventions, somewhat irregular in political behavior, somewhat impetuous in political life. Gross "excesses" are natural and inevitable and only narrow-minded philistines will whiningly echo the enraged howls of the dispossessed oppressors. Yet, when we come to examine them, the charges made by such men as Rhodes, Oberholtzer, Dunning, Bowers, etc., even if taken at their face value, which they assuredly should not be, are charges that might with equal force be leveled against every government, Federal, state and municipal, North and South, Republican and Democratic, of

the time—and against the "lily-white" Restoration governments that followed in the South with the reaction. Only compare the public moneys stolen by officers of the Reconstruction governments with the vast sums that found their way into the pockets of the Tweed Ring in the perfectly Conservative, Democratic, Copperhead City of New York!

The great significance of the Reconstruction governments lies in their positive revolutionary work. It was these governments that smashed, temporarily at least, the incredibly vicious "Black Codes." DuBois very correctly emphasizes [24] that

> "in legislating concerning property, the wider functions of the state, the punishment of crime, and the like, it is sufficient to say that the laws on these points established by the Reconstruction legislatures were not only very different from but even revolutionary to the laws in the older South."

It must not be forgotten that it was the Reconstruction governments—the despised Negro-carpetbagger-scalawag regime—that established democratic government in South, that enfranchised the poor whites, who had been deprived of their right to vote and of many civil liberties in the old South because of their poverty, that set up a free public school system where public education had been largely unknown, that "abolished the whipping-post,

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24 W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro*, p. 220.

the branding-iron, the stocks, and other barbaric modes of punishment" (Tourgee), that "reduced capital felonies from about twenty to three," that broke the ground in the way of social legislation. Speaking of the Reconstruction conventions, Oberholtzer is forced to admit: [25]

> "The various assemblies had much in common. It was said of them truly by a conservative in Louisiana that they were agrarian and revolutionary. Our own and the French Revolutions had not yielded more prolific discussion of the subject of freedom and equality, the 'inherent right of suffrage' under a republican form of government, the 'God-given and sacred right' to vote, the 'halo of liberty', which, henceforward, would surround every human head, especially if it belonged to a poor and ignorant man."

There were giants in those days because it was an age demanding and creating giants. The great figures that led the Abolition and Radical hosts in desperate battle deserve the profoundest respect of the revolutionist of today, of every man who prizes liberty and human progress. Thad Stevens, the indomitable warrior, the Great Commoner, whose badge of honor is the frantic hate that the slaveowners and their spiritual descendants have heaped upon his memory for generations; Charles Sumner, the incorruptible, the incarnate heart and conscience of the nation, holding ideals and principles far above party and

place; Wendell Phillips, the fiery-tongued Abolitionist, the invincible tribune of the friendless and the oppressed, the living bond between yesterday and today, between the war against chattel-slavery and the struggle against capitalist wage-slavery. To the revolutionists of today belongs their tradition and not to the lily-white party of Hoover the slave-trader!

We are the truer guardians—let us claim our heritage!

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25 E. P. Oberholtzer, *History of the United States since the Civil War*, Vol. 22, p. 37.

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